

A P N I E T

A 21ST - CENTURY APPROACH TO APOSTOLIC MINISTRY¹

Dan Sinclair and Dick Scoggins

We're all so very familiar with the traditional mission agency (TMA) structure that we may unconsciously think it's the only approach to obeying Jesus' Great Commission. TMAs more or less grew up in 19th-century Europe as various "missionary societies", and have since proliferated especially in 20th-century North America and Europe with both denominational and non-denominational forms. In fact, God's apostolic emissaries have been taking the gospel to unreached peoples throughout the centuries, well before the TMA structure came along. For over 200 years the TMA approach has served God's people well (especially from the West), as it has fit comfortably with the world as it was. Hundreds of people working together in a collective sodality have afforded tremendous advantages:

1. Easy recruitment and deployment
2. Solid link between those on the field and those in support ministries back in the "home office"
3. "Name recognition" and the trust that automatically bestows ("Oh, you're going out with OM? That's great. Here's some support...")
4. Synergy between various departments (e.g., oversight and member care, finance and church relations)
5. The kind of built-in accountability that comes from a hierarchical structure

But the world has changed. Some of the old advantages are now disadvantages. ("Oh, you're with OM? You have 48 hours to leave the country.")

Working solely within one organization can be confining, limiting gifted ministers to impact only within their organization. Large organizations cannot adapt quickly to rapidly changing circumstances. And they are not equally good at everything they do, so a member of a given organization must be content with its particular strengths and weaknesses.

Does It All Have To Be Vertical?

Consider the primary functions that an agency typically provides:

1. Definition of vision and ethos
2. Recruiting
3. Team formation / personnel deployment
4. Financial administration
5. Oversight and coaching
6. Training and leadership development
7. Infrastructure (including hosting conferences for ongoing connectivity)
8. Member care

There are other important ministries within agencies, but these are perhaps the most common.

Ask yourself: Do all these functions always have to be "vertical", under one organizational roof? For the last 200 years that's the way it's been.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

What if we positioned these sorts of ministries into separate, networked, but autonomous entities?

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Instead of being vertically piled up in each agency, they would be laid out horizontally as separate ministries, all committed to serving those apostolic workers on the field. These operations would be, in business jargon, “loosely coupled, highly aligned”. Imagine a world with hundreds, of autonomous, specialized but interlinked entities, working together to serve those on the frontlines to fulfill the Great Commission. Imagine an explosion of apostolic ministry among unreached peoples, more adaptable to varying contexts, made possible by whole new approaches in mobilization and support. The closest analogy is perhaps the Internet.

Each node or “Apostolic Service Provider” (ASP) would focus on one or a few vital ministries, such as:

- recruiting, pre-field evaluations
- team formation / personnel deployment
- pre-field training
- financial administration
- oversight and coaching
- training and leadership development
- infrastructure
 - member care
 - fund-raising and development
 - financial receiving and administration (especially with a secular, non-profit profile)
 - mobilization of proximate Christian background believers into neighboring unreached peoples
 - email and other IT services
 - conferences between related ministries
 - relationship brokering, specialized networking
- church relations
- children’s education services
- language and culture learning assistance
- internships
- crisis assistance
- commercial tentmaking facilitation
- business set-ups
- NGO facilitation
- specialized printing and publishing

Plus dozens of other vital services we can’t think of now, but which will surely arise in years to come.

ASPs could be easy to start-up, and soon there would be hundreds linked together for the spread of the gospel among all people groups, forming a global apostolic network, or “ApNet”. And within the ApNet could be a variety of sub-affiliations or movements (e.g., church-planting among Muslim UPGs).

This flattening of the apostolic enterprise reflects what is happening elsewhere in human enterprise. In *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, Thomas Friedman has written,

The world has been flattened by the convergence of ten major political events, innovations, and companies. None of us has rested since, or maybe ever will again.²

The net result of this convergence was the creation of a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration—the sharing of knowledge and work—in real time, without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language. No, not everyone has access yet to this platform, this playing field, but it is open today to more people in more places on more days in more ways than anything like it ever before in the history of the world. This is what I mean when I say the world has been flattened. It is the complementary convergence of the ten flatteners, creating this new global playing field for multiple forms of collaboration.³

Peter Goldmark (former president of the Rockefeller Foundation) has commented on how the number of non-governmental organizations in the world has exploded in the past 25 years:

You have restless people seeking to deal with problems that were not being successfully coped with by existing institutions. They escaped the old formats and were driven to invent new forms of organizations. They found more freedom, more effectiveness and more productive engagement.⁴

Thousands of NGOs operating more narrowly have found that they can be more effective than operating in just a few large organizations. In the same way, we anticipate a rapid multiplication of ASPs, creating a huge boost to apostolic work around the globe, Lord willing.

All of the ASPs and the ApNet as a whole would exist to serve and facilitate those on the frontlines working with unreached people groups. Seeing over 100 ASPs emerge by the end of 2011 is possible in the Lord!

21st-Century Advantages

The advantages of TMAs could be retained, while avoiding the growing disadvantages, and becoming a more nimble structure for the world in which we now live. We would envision ASPs as being able to serve TMAs as well as independent apostolic teams on the field (e.g. church-based teams), delivering the best services available in a flat world.

Some new realities in today’s environment:

1. Larger sending churches are increasingly favoring church-based teams, and the ApNet environment is ideally suited to serve these teams which are sent out directly from the local church.



2. Advanced communications (such as secure email, Skype, and secure websites) and cheaper, easier travel now make diverse and global collaboration possible.
3. There are new high levels of trust and common vision between related agencies.

And there are other ways in which the ApNet is better suited to the 21st century:

1. Quality ministries are no longer limited to the confines of one agency. This takes the level of cooperation on and off the field to a new level. Synergy is increased. Global collaboration occurs in particular areas, not limited by the walls of one agency. Services and help are available from a wider range and not just one's agency.
2. Rapid expansion of mobilization and support services.
3. Apostolic teams, if they so choose, would not belong to a known, identifiable "mission" organization.⁵ This legitimate deniability may improve one's viability and identity on the field.
4. Instead of a mission organization doing a so-so job in a given area or department (e.g. training), specialized ministries can become expert, and people can focus in the area of their passions.
5. Downsides of present agencies are reduced or eliminated, such as heavy dues, policies (or tax status) that may not fit a particular situation, etc. Field workers can pick and choose what services they want and from whom.
6. Ministries can change or retool very quickly to meet changing circumstances, not being bound by decades of organizational inertia or ill-fitting policies.
7. ASPs will succeed or fail according to the marketplace. In other words, they will be driven to meet real needs or go out of existence.
8. The ApNet will grow relationally and organically, which fits better in this postmodern world.
9. ASPs are service providers in the true sense, and are not command-and-control structures.

Frequently Asked Questions

1) *What makes a ministry or an organization an ASP?*
 Many specialized ministries already exist, but are not yet ASPs as such. A set of ASP protocols will be crafted to help these ministries decide whether or not to adapt to and join the ApNet and to guide new ASPs into existence. These will probably include such terms as:

- a. The ASP exists to provide vital service(s) to front-line apostolic ministries.

- b. It must be "anti-silo", without an exclusive clientele (e.g. a single TMA).
- c. It is committed to linkage and communication, speed and networking.
- d. The aim of a given ASP is not to become big and famous itself, but to aid effectiveness, growth and reproduction on the field, and possibly the birth of other ASPs.

2) *What would the infrastructure look like?*

As in the Internet, in the ApNet each node must be somehow inter-connectable to other ASPs and ministries on the field. In this way for example, a team of Nigerian church-planters that needs help with well-digging management might draw from an ASP based in Arizona that has the expertise. A recruiting and mobilization ASP in Mexico can help an under-manned team in Aceh grow to proper strength.

The necessary tactics and means have yet to be worked out. Nonetheless we are convinced they are doable; in most areas the technology and tools already exist in the business world. We will need the power of Google-like search tools and MySpace-like communications environments to facilitate the ApNet. The Lord will provide.

3) *Is the ApNet just a way for gospel workers in sensitive environments to somehow be secretive in their work?*

Certainly not. What is primarily driving this new concept is the desire to see an explosion of new apostolic efforts on the field and new effective ministries to support them. Having said that, the ApNet may offer more integrity for those who wish to avoid trouble with governments who may be antagonistic to workers seeking to convey the Good News.

4) *What about security?*

The information about ministries in hostile environments will continue to be very sensitive. As described above, the ApNet requires significant interconnectivity and communications, and the means to handle sensitive information will need to be developed. For example, we are interacting with one ministry with a high security sensitivity. They have shown interest in becoming an ASP and have already devised security protocols to enable this. Likewise there are existing tools for security which the financial industry has developed in order to operate in a flat world. We have a lot to learn, but we won't be needing to re-invent the security wheel.



5) *How is trust to be developed between the various parties (i.e. pre-field candidates, on-field teams, ASPs, sending churches, etc.)?*

As mentioned, TMAs enjoy a built-in level of trust and brand-name recognition. If a team is forming and going out without benefit of a TMA, but with the assistance of a handful of ASPs, how can the various parties know each other and form trust-bonds? How can support be raised without the automatic recognition of an “OM”, “YWAM” or “Pioneers”? This is the subject of another paper, but good ideas are already coming together to meet this challenge. Once again, it is important to realize that flat business with extensive supply chains have already proven that this can be done.

6) *What is the future of TMAs?*

The flattening in the business world has not meant an end to large corporations. Rather, the way they do business now is to focus more on what they uniquely do best and outsource much of what others can do better. This has led to the restructuring of big business, not its demise. We think that in similar ways ASPs will not eliminate TMAs but rather serve and augment them. Many early ASPs will likely focus on connecting resources to needs across agency lines, as is already beginning to happen in the area of training. At this point in time, it is crucial for mission agencies and those working on the ApNet to work together well (and probably with some overlap) for the sake of the gospel. Lord willing, synergy will grow.

7) *What's next?*

Many are discussing this very question. This is exciting stuff but surely needs more prayer, brainstorming and work. There are many issues to work out such as ApNet architecture, interconnectivity structures, solutions in communications and security, ways for ASPs and TMAs to work together, how ASPs market

their services, finance, how to help some ministries become ASPs and how to help new ASPs come into existence, and how to streamline the ASPs' overhead. Watch this space!

We'd love to hear your thoughts. Please email us at dick@dickscoggins.com 

Endnotes

- 1 The New Testament apostles—both the Twelve and non-Twelve apostles, along with their fellow-workers—took the gospel to people groups that did not yet have the church established in their midst, seeking to establish new communities of faith in Jesus. Today this is often termed pioneer church-planting among unreached people groups.
- 2 Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 48.
- 3 Friedman, 176-177.
- 4 David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
- 5 “Missions” and “missionary” are good words, properly understood. However, because these words are so misunderstood and distorted in parts of the world, gospel workers are increasingly avoiding them.

ARE YOU BETWEEN AGES 18 - 30? IS THE LORD CALLING YOU TO SERVE?



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